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Kampuchea: The Khmer People's National Liberation Front

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Summary

The Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) is the only significant non-Communist resistance force operating in Kampuchea. Its activities are modest and concentrated near the Thai border. Thailand and China have pressed the KPNLF for some time to join a united front with Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea (DK) forces to broaden the base of the anti-Vietnamese effort and to help counteract Pol Pot's negative international image.

Earlier this year, it appeared that KPNLF leader Son Sann, who has long resisted pressure to join Pol Pot, might be nearing an agreement to participate in a united front. Whatever momentum toward a merger may have existed, however, was slowed when Prince Norodom Sihanouk suddenly suggested he might participate. Having successfully delayed any announcement of a merger by the KPNLF and DK in this way, Sihanouk then refused to join the DK, although he kept open the possibility of reconsidering sometime in the future.

Thailand and China will now probably return to their original plan and resume pressure on Son Sann. Although he has agreed in principle to join a united front with the DK, Son Sann has yet to enter serious discussions on implementing a merger. Son Sann hopes to obtain support from the United States in building his own military force to counterbalance Chinese aid to the DK and to improve his bargaining position in future negotiations. It is unlikely, however, that an effective non-Communist fighting force would be available to replace the DK in the near future. Moreover, any DK-KPNLF united front would probably be short lived and ineffective.

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**Kampuchea: The Khmer People's
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**Organization and
Personalities**

The Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) is the only significant non-Communist Khmer political force. Other self-styled Free Khmer groups tend to be little more than armed bandits participating in the lucrative Thai-Kampuchea border trade, but the KPNLF has cohesion, nationalistic motivation, and a small measure of international support.¹

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Established in October 1979, the Front operates largely on the Thai side of the border or close to it inside Kampuchea. The movement is headed by 70-year-old President Son Sann and Vice President Chhean Vam. Most day-to-day operations, however, are handled by an Executive Committee with headquarters in Bangkok; its most prominent member is Armed Forces Chief of Staff Dien Del, a respected former Cambodian Army officer with little guerrilla warfare experience. Subsidiary bodies include a National Council, a Military Council, and a Council of Elders, composed in part of expatriates living in France and the United States.

For administrative purposes, the KPNLF has divided Kampuchea into Northern, Central, and Southern military regions, but the jurisdiction over these areas is more theoretical than real. The Front maintains approximately 3,000 to 5,000 armed troops, compared to approximately 35,000 of Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea (DK) troops inside Kampuchea.² The Front's occasional claims of military activity deep inside Kampuchea are usually unsubstantiated, and its frequent claim to thousands of supporters throughout Kampuchea and abroad is untested.

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Although it controls a few villages in Kampuchea close to the border and occasionally harasses Vietnamese troops, the KPNLF concentrates on recruiting supporters from refugee camps inside Thailand. The recruits receive some military training but lack adequate arms and ammunition. They also receive a six-week political indoctrination course designed to produce a cadre capable of assuring victory if UN-supervised elections ever take place in Kampuchea.

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The KPNLF has attracted some international attention outside Thailand. In his press interviews from Kampuchea, Bangkok, and Paris, Son Sann projects the image of a somewhat melancholy patriot working tirelessly for

¹ See appendix for the genesis of the KPNLF.

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² We do not know the actual size of the KPNLF army. If the Khmer forces loosely associated with the Front are included, the number may be as high as 8,000 to 10,000.

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the good of his nation against both Pol Pot and the Vietnamese.³ He served in Cambodian governments beginning in the 1940s—eventually becoming Prime Minister in 1967—and earned a reputation for integrity; he was critical of both Lon Nol, who seized power in 1970, and Prince Sihanouk, who supported the DK from exile in Beijing. The KPNLF benefits from the authenticity of Son Sann's claim of being an honest patriot. [REDACTED] 25X1

A Strategy for Survival

Although KPNLF leaders hope their army will become a significant military force and although they have bold military plans for operations inside Kampuchea, their political strategy reflects their military impotence. They seek primarily to survive as a political alternative for Kampuchea. Their goal includes an internationally sponsored Vietnamese withdrawal and the withering away of Pol Pot's forces. As part of this strategy, the KPNLF wants financial support and arms—beyond what it has received from China and Thailand—from the United States, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Japan, and West European countries. The aid probably is sought less for direct material benefit than as tangible evidence of broad international support that could eventually translate into political backing in a UN-sponsored negotiated settlement. [REDACTED] 25X1

The KPNLF also may hope that Moscow and Hanoi will eventually consider it an acceptable alternative to the existing pro-Vietnamese regime and the DK; KPNLF leaders have occasionally hinted that they have received feelers from the Soviets and the Vietnamese. The KPNLF's desire to emerge as an attractive third force in Hanoi's eyes gives it a strong incentive not to cooperate with DK leaders. For the same reason, the Front would prefer to keep China at arm's length while at the same time seeking its financial and military assistance. [REDACTED] 25X1

The KPNLF operates in an uneasy relationship with other non-Communist Khmer resistance groups. It has undertaken a campaign to absorb through co-optation and coercion as many of the smaller Khmer armed groups as it can. This occasionally leads to armed clashes and may taint the KPNLF's reputation. [REDACTED] 25X1

³ Pol Pot's DK "government," currently headed by Prime Minister Khieu Samphan, was brought to power by the Khmer Rouge in 1975 and was toppled by Vietnamese troops in late 1978. Most of Kampuchea now is administered by a Hanoi-backed puppet Khmer government, headed by Heng Samrin and called the People's Republic of Kampuchea. The DK, with Chinese support, still maintains a government structure, retains some international recognition, and has an army that operates inside Kampuchea. The DK also controls Kampuchea's UN seat over the strenuous objections of the Soviet Bloc. Various neutral and pro-West governments, appalled by the excesses of Pol Pot when he was in power, do not recognize his regime although most of them support DK retention of the UN seat. [REDACTED] 25X1

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The KPNLF has consistently shunned association with Pol Pot's army and government, although it has declared a policy of not fighting the DK army inside Kampuchea. Many of the Front's members suffered during Pol Pot's terror campaigns in 1975-78 and are convinced that any association with the repudiated DK leaders would cost the KPNLF its support among the Kampuchean people. [REDACTED] 25X1

Pressure for a United Front

The KPNLF's major backers, Thailand and China, have long pressed Son Sann and his followers to join a united political front with Pol Pot's forces. The latest such proposal calls for top DK leaders to step down, turning over key leadership posts in the DK to KPNLF leaders. The purge, however, would not be total, and the plan is vague regarding how far removed from the scene the current DK leaders would actually be. The plan is designed to convince the international community that the DK regime has been genuinely reformed, but to do this without damaging the DK's fighting ability, which depends on a chain of personal loyalties that connects the lowest ranks with Pol Pot. [REDACTED] 25X1

The plan's promoters tacitly acknowledge that the plan is a marriage of convenience in which each participant can harbor different expectations. The current DK leaders assume that they will eventually destroy their non-Communist partner, as they have done with such groups in the past. Some KPNLF advocates of the plan probably believe that outside support will enable them to come out on top. The Thais, and perhaps the Chinese, may hope that a renovated regime will become a vehicle that will not only unite the Khmer resistance but also attract Prince Sihanouk into the resistance effort against Vietnam. [REDACTED] 25X1

The impetus for the latest merger proposal came from a pessimistic ASEAN assessment of the chances that the DK can retain international support. Although an ASEAN resolution supporting the DK's retention of the country's UN seat was carried by a large margin at the General Assembly session in September, ASEAN nations and others left New York with the impression that the DK, at least as then constituted, would not fare well at the 1981 session. A reshuffling of the DK government in 1979, which removed Pol Pot from political leadership, and a subsequent DK repudiation of past excesses had clearly failed to convince the international community that the DK merited lasting support. ASEAN members were also concerned that planned Vietnam-sponsored elections in Kampuchea would cause more countries to recognize the pro-Vietnam Heng Samrin regime. [REDACTED] 25X1

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A Change of Strategy?

After mid-January, signs appeared suggesting Son Sann had second thoughts about his rejection of the latest Thai-Chinese proposal. At the same time, unconfirmed press reports alleged that the DK leadership had agreed to go into exile in China and to turn over the top posts in the DK government to the KPNLF; a few minor DK officials would be retained but would hold less important portfolios. [REDACTED]

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Although it is unlikely that the DK officials will banish themselves, it is possible that Son Sann agreed to a coalition in principle on the condition that his own organization retain the senior posts and receive large amounts of arms aid and financial support. Facing a probable end of crucial Thai assistance, Son Sann may have decided to accept a deal. He also may be stalling for time on the assumption that the merger will founder over implementation while he benefits by appearing flexible. In the past, when Son Sann has appeared close to accepting association with the DK he has ended by backing away. [REDACTED]

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Son Sann may be under pressure from other KPNLF leaders to agree to a coalition. Chief of Staff Dien Del supports the merger and has strongly criticized Son Sann in the past for his refusal to compromise with the DK. Dien Del reportedly believes that if the coalition were successfully sold to the Kampuchean people and quickly recognized by a significant number of

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countries, a united front might work to the KPNLF's advantage. Chhean Vam, who has family ties to the DK leadership and who also reportedly has differences with Son Sann, may favor the plan as well. The KPNLF rank and file, however, may have a less calculating and less optimistic view of association with the hated DK. [REDACTED] 25X1

Sihanouk as Spoiler?

Son Sann's late December visit to Beijing, coupled with increasing international speculation that a united front between the KPNLF and the DK was near, evidently persuaded Prince Sihanouk to act to preserve his political equities. Sihanouk's long-range objective is to be influential in any future government in Phnom Penh, when and if the Vietnamese leave, and to prevent the DK's return to power. His only bargaining chip is his value as a legitimizing symbol for any proposed coalition. He has no armed force sufficient to compete with the KPNLF—much less the DK—as a potential resistance force in a united front. [REDACTED] 25X1

Sihanouk probably believes his only hope of achieving his objectives is to delay creation of a united front until he can participate in more than symbolic terms. Thus on 8 February he announced that under certain conditions he would participate in a front including the DK; on 10 March he rejected participation because DK leader Khieu Samphan would not accept his conditions, but at the same time he did not foreclose the possibility of future discussions. [REDACTED] 25X1

Sihanouk's on-again, off-again approach to participation probably is intended to indefinitely delay any possibility of a merger between the KPNLF and the DK. Son Sann, for his part, appears increasingly unwilling to cooperate with Sihanouk. He fears that Sihanouk and the DK combined would overpower him in any tripartite union, and so he has toughened his own conditions for a merger. China and Thailand prefer that both Sihanouk and Son Sann participate, but with the Prince once again backing away, they will probably renew their pressure on Son Sann to merge with the DK. [REDACTED] 25X1

Prospects for a KPNLF-DK Merger

Son Sann has three choices:

- Resist Thai pressure and remain independent of the DK.
- Agree to a coalition with the DK.
- Attempt to do both by appearing to go along with a merger, while keeping open the option to back out if the deal looks bad on closer examination.

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Outright rejection risks a cutoff of Thai aid, something the Thais claim to be willing to do if the KPNLF does not go along. It also risks that the Thais might promote a faction within the KPNLF that would be favorable to a merger, and perhaps even deport Son Sann. The KPNLF leader has withstood Thai pressure in the past, but the KPNLF could not operate without Thai cooperation. If he continues to balk at a merger, Son Sann may decide, or be forced by his colleagues, to resign as president. [REDACTED] 25X1

A merger in which the senior DK leadership steps out of sight as the KPNLF assumes control of the largely theoretical government would create a structure whose long-term effectiveness is doubtful. The antithetical and competitive nature of the participants alone would create instability, and such a recast DK regime would be unlikely to achieve the objectives sought by the Thais and Chinese. On the one hand, a coalition in which the KPNLF leaders merely coexisted with important DK leaders would not be much more attractive to either the international community or the Kampuchean people, who would both be aware of the lurking presence of Pol Pot offstage. On the other hand, a coalition on Son Sann's terms, in which senior DK leaders were exiled, would have difficulty sustaining the loyalty and thus the cohesion of the DK army, the only effective fighting force. Prospects are dim that an effective non-Communist Khmer fighting force would be available to replace the DK in the near future. Any DK-KPNLF united front would probably be a short, unhappy, and ineffective union [REDACTED] 25X1

Son Sann probably will try to adopt the ambiguous position of the third tactic in the hope that it will end with an independent KPNLF free from association with Pol Pot. He may reason that he can forestall Thai pressure by agreeing in principle to a merger. If he discovers that the old DK leadership continues to compete for power, he can bow out on the grounds that the agreement is not being implemented as he understood it. In the meantime, he will have shown flexibility and perhaps obtained some extra material support and political commitments from the Thais and others. [REDACTED] 25X1

For now, Son Sann wants to strengthen the KPNLF military, particularly by attracting support from the United States. This would not only counter-balance Chinese aid to the DK in the event a merger occurs but also reduce KPNLF dependence on Thai and Chinese support, giving the KPNLF more room to maneuver during any future negotiations on a united front. [REDACTED] 25X1

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Appendix**The Making of the KPNLF**

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In March 1979, Son Sann, in association with other Khmers in Paris, formed an organization known briefly as the Khmer Liberation Movement. The Thais by then were supporting Pol Pot, who was ousted from power in Phnom Penh by the Vietnamese invasion in December 1978, and they urged Son Sann to place his organization under the command of the DK. Son Sann seriously considered this, and in April 1979 he traveled to Bangkok and Beijing for meetings with DK Foreign Minister Ieng Sary and senior Chinese officials.

The details of Son Sann's discussion with Ieng Sary are not known, and the talks may have been deliberately ambiguous on both sides. Son Sann demurred on forming a united front with the DK at that time but may have agreed to cooperate quietly with operations inside Kampuchea while publicly maintaining distance from the DK.

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By August 1979, it was clear that the tentative step toward cooperation was a false start. Son Sann returned to Bangkok from Paris, reportedly frustrated by an unsuccessful effort to obtain Prince Sihanouk's backing for his group and angered by public DK statements about its cooperation with him. He resisted further Thai pressure to associate with the DK and refused to join a DK-sponsored united front organization established in early September. One month later, he presided over a ceremony in the Kampuchean jungle near the Thai border at which the KPNLF was established.

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The KPNLF occasionally received favorable mention in the Western press throughout 1980 but remained militarily impotent. It was unable to attract a significant number of recruits and remained under intense pressure to unite

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with Pol Pot. China ceased its support in January after delivering only the first installment of its promised aid. Beijing promised more assistance if the KPNLF would cooperate with the DK. [REDACTED]

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Son Sann continued to resist while hinting that he might form a provisional government of his own. In June he returned to Paris, frail and, as a colleague put it, working without conviction that his cause would win. A trip to China in July produced no new aid, and the Chinese suggested he should seek aid from countries more sympathetic to his viewpoint. The most recent Thai-Chinese campaign to forge a united front is thus another chapter in a long, inconclusive story. [REDACTED]

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